Amendments to the Claims:

This listing of claims will replace all prior versions, and listings, of claims in the application:

Listing of Claims:

1. (currently amended) A method of stereospecifically preparing a 3ß-hydroxy-5β-H steroidal sapogenin ~~or a derivative thereof~~, which comprises reducing a 3-keto-5β-H steroidal sapogenin using a reducing agent comprising a hindered organoborane ~~or an organo-aluminium hydride~~.

2. (original) A method according to claim 1, wherein the reducing agent is a hindered organoborane reagent in which organic groups contain more than two carbon atoms and the sapogenin obtained is predominantly a 3β-hydroxy, 5β-H- sapogenin.

3. (previously presented) A method according to claim 1, wherein hindered organoborane is selected from lithium tri-sec-butylborohydride, potassium tri-sec-butylborohydride, sodium tri-sec-butylborohydride, lithium trisiamylborohydride, potassium trisiamylborohydride, potassium triphenylborohydride and lithium triphenylborohydride.

4. (original) A method according to claim 3, wherein the hindered organoborane is lithiumtri-sec-butylborohydride.

5. (cancelled)

6. (previously presented) A method according to claim 1, wherein the molar ratio of the predominant sapogenin obtained to the alternative 3-epimer, is at least about 10:1.

7. (original) A method according to claim 6, wherein the ratio is at least about 15:1.

8. (previously presented) A method according to claim 1, when performed in an organic solvent selected from tetrahydrofuran, toluene, tert-butyl methyl ether,diethoxymethane, 1,4-dioxan,2-methyltetrahydrofuran and any mixture thereof.

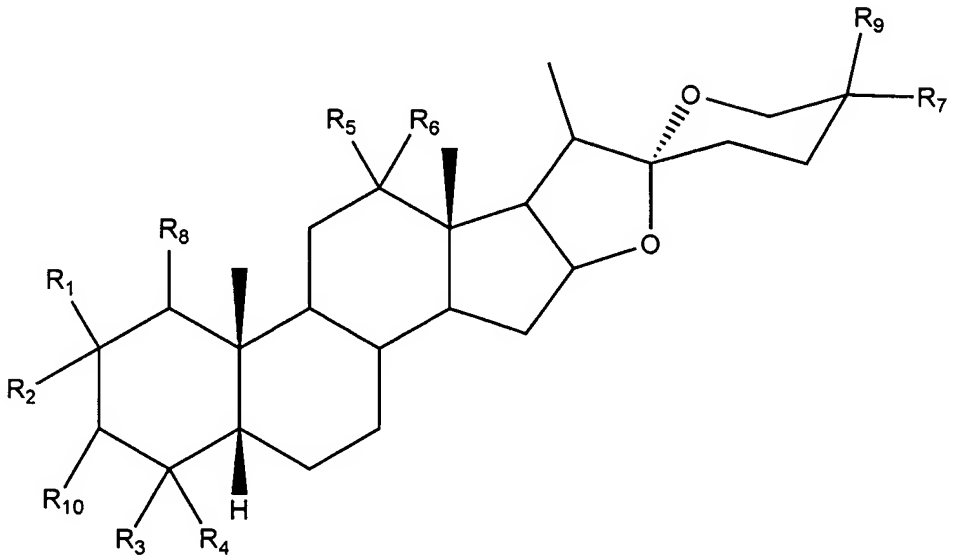
9. (original) A method according to claim 8, wherein the organic solvent consists essentially of tetrahydrofuran.

10. (original) A method according to claim 8, wherein the organic solvent consists essentially of toluene.

11. (original) A method according to claim 8, wherein the organic solvent consists essentially of 1, 4-dioxan.

12. (original) A method according to claim 8, wherein the organic solvent consists essentiallyof 2-methyltetrahydrofuran.

13. (previously presented) A method according to claim 1, wherein the desired sapogenin is a compound of general formula.



wherein R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, R7, R8 and R9 are, independently of each other, H, Cl-4 alkyl, OH, or OR (where R = C6-12 aryl or Cl-4 alkyl), or R5 and R6 together may represent a =O (carbonyl) or protected carbonyl group, the stereochemistry at carbon centre 3 can be either R or S, and R10 represents OH, an O-linked sugar group or any organic ester group.

14. (currently amended) A method according to claim 13, wherein the sapogenin is selected from sarsasapogenin, ~~episarsasapogenin,~~ smilagenin, ~~epismilagenin~~ and esters thereof.

15. (previously presented) A method according to claim 1, wherein the 3- keto, 5β-H steroidal sapogenin starting material is prepared by heterogeneous catalytic hydrogenation of a corresponding Δ4, 3-keto steroidal sapogenin to convert the Δ4, 3-keto steroidal sapogenin at least predominantly to the said 5β-H, 3-ketone.

16. (original) A method according to claim 15, wherein the heterogeneous catalytic

hydrogenation is performed using hydrogen and a palladium catalyst in an organic solvent.

17. (original). A method according to claim 16, wherein the palladium catalyst is present on a support.

18. (previously presented) A method according to claim 15, wherein the Δ4, 3-keto steroidal sapogenin is diosgenone.

19. (original) A method according to claim 18, wherein the diosgenone is obtained by oxidationof diosgenin.

20. (original) A method for the conversion of 3α-hydroxy-5β-H steroidal sapogenins and derivatives thereof to 3β-hydroxy-5β-H steroidal sapogenins and derivatives thereof, which comprises contacting a 3-hydroxy-activated derivative of a 3α-hydroxy-5β-H steroidal sapogenin with a nucleophile under conditions favouring nucleophilic substitution with inversion at the 3-position, with optional subsequent adjustment of the 3-substituent as desired.

21. (original) A method according to claim 20, wherein the reaction is performed according to the Mitsonobu reaction protocol, to yield an ester derivative of the 3β-hydroxy-5β-H steroidal sapogenin.

22. (original) A method according to claim 20, wherein the activated derivative of the sapogenin is an organic sulphonated derivative.

23. (original) A method for the synthesis of smilagenin, comprising catalytic hydrogenation of diosgenone followed by reduction of the resulting 3-keto, 5β-H steroidal sapogenin using a hindered organoborane.

24. (original) A method for the synthesis of epismilagenin, comprising catalytic hydrogenation of diosgenone followed by reduction of the resulting 3-keto,5β-H steroidal sapogenin using anorganoalumino-. hydride.

25. (previously presented) A method according to claim 20, wherein a sapogenin initially formed is subsequently converted to a pro-drug form thereof or to another physiologically acceptable form thereof.

26. (new) A method according to claim 2, wherein the hindred organoborane is an alkali metal tri-alkyl or tri-aryl borohydride reducing agent.

27. (new) A method according to any one of claims 20 to 22, wherein the 3-hydroxy-activated derivative of the 3α-hydroxy-5ß-H steroidal sapogenin is prepared by reducing a 3-keto-5ß-H steroidal sapogenin using a reducing agent comprising an organoborane including organic groups having up to two carbon atoms or an organo-aluminum hydride, with subsequent conversion of the resultant 3α-hydroxy -5ß-H steroidal sapogeninto its 3-hydroxy-activated derivative.

28. (new) A method according to claim 27, wherein the organo-aluminum hydride is lithium tri-ert-butoxyaluminohydride.

29. (new) A method according to claim 28, wherein the organoborane is lithium triethylborohydride.

30. (new) A method according to any one of claims 27 to 29, wherein the 3α-hydroxy-5ß-H steroidal sapogenin and derivatives thereof produced in the reduction are selected from eplsarsasapogenin, epismilagenin and esters thereof.

31. (new) A method according to any one of claims 20 to 22 and 27 to 29, wherein the 3ß-hydroxy-5ß-H steroidal sapogenin and derivatives thereof produced in the conversion are selected form sarsasapogenin, smilagenin and esters thereof.

32. (new) A method according to any one of claims 22 to 25, wherein the 3-keto-5ß-H steroidal sapogenin is prepared by heterogeneous catalytic hydrogenation of a corresponding Δ4, 3-keto steroidal sapogenin to convert the Δ4, 3-keto steroidal sapogenin at least predominantly to the said 5ß-H, 3-ketone.

33. (new) A method according to claim 33 or claim 34, wherein the Δ4, 3-keto steroidal sapogenin is diosgenone, which is obtained by oxidation of disgenin.